

Message Text

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SUBJECT: MINERS OVERWHELMINGLY AUTHORIZE STRIKE ACTION
IN SUPPORT OF CLAIM

REF: LONDON 19058

1. MINEWORKERS THROUGHOUT BRITAIN GAVE OVERWHELMING
SUPPORT TO A REQUEST FROM THEIR EXECUTIVE FOR AUTHORIZA-
TION TO STRIKE IF NECESSARY OVER THE NATIONAL UNION OF
MINERS' (NUM) RETIREMENT CLAIM (REFTEL). A PIT HEAD
BALLOT ANNOUNCED TODAY (DECEMBER 15) INDICATED THAT 78
PERCENT OF MINERS WHO VOTED FAVORED SUCH AN AUTHORIZA-
TION.

2. THIS MEANS THAT THE HANDS OF KEY NEGOTIATORS SUCH AS
NUM PRESIDENT JOE GORMLEY HAVE BEEN STRENGTHENED IN THEIR
DEALING WITH THE NATIONAL COAL BOARD (NCB). THUS FAR,
THE TWO SIDES ARE QUITE FAR APART. THE NUM SEEKS RETIRE-
MENT AT 60 AT FULL PAY FOR ALL MINERS WITH 10 YEARS
SERVICE BEGINNING JANUARY 1977, TO BE REDUCED SEMI-
ANNUALLY TO 55 BY 1980. THE NATIONAL COAL BOARD HAS
OFFERED AN EARLY RETIREMENT PLAN LIMITED TO UNDERGROUND
MINERS WITH 25 YEARS SERVICE BEGINNING AT AGE 64 -- ONLY
WHEN THE PAY POLICY WILL ALLOW IT -- AND PHASING DOWN
ANNUALLY TO 62.

3. DESPITE THE GAP, THERE IS SOME REASON TO BE HOPEFUL
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PAGE 02 LONDON 20260 151952Z

THAT A COMPROMISE CAN BE REACHED. SIR DEREK EZRA OFFERED

TO REOPEN TALKS WITH THE MINERS EVEN BEFORE THE VOTE WAS ANNOUNCED, AND THERE HAVE BEEN REPORTS, ALBEIT UNCONFIRMED, THAT THE NCB IS PREPARED TO "SWEETEN ITS OFFER". HOWEVER, THERE ARE CONSIDERABLE LIMITS ON HOW FAR IT CAN GO. THE NCB CANNOT OFFER A RETIREMENT PROGRAM WHICH COMES INTO EFFECT PRIOR TO A CHANGE IN THE CURRENT PAY POLICY, WHICH ENDS ON JULY 31, 1977. MOREOVER, THE NCB HAS TO WEIGH THE COST OF ANY IMPROVEMENT IN ITS ORIGINAL OFFER, PARTICULARLY IN THE LIGHT OF THE CURRENT AUSTERITY PROGRAM OF THE GOVERNMENT, WHICH CANNOT BE SIMPLY AN IDLE BYSTANDER. THE GOVERNMENT IS ALSO CONCERNED THAT OTHER UNIONS ARE LIKELY TO EMULATE THE MINERS' DEMANDS FOR LOWER RETIREMENT -- AS INDEED, THE IRON AND STEEL TRADES CONFEDERATION HAS ALREADY DONE.

4. IT IS ALSO TRUE THAT THE SITUATION TODAY IS NOT THE SAME AS 1974 WHEN THE MINERS STRUCK. THE MINERS WILL NOT HAVE THE SUPPORT OF THE TUC LEADERS IF THEY STRIKE IN VIOLATION OF THE PAY RESTRAINT POLICY OR IF THEY MAINTAIN WHAT THE TUC CONSIDERS UNREASONABLE DEMANDS. THE NEXT FEW WEEKS WILL GIVE A CLEAR INDICATION WHETHER A SETTLEMENT IS IN THE OFFING. A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE NUM WILL BE HELD ON TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21, BUT INFORMAL MEETINGS BETWEEN THE NCB AND THE NUM NEGOTIATORS COULD SPEED UP THE PROCESS OF NEGOTIATIONS.

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